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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policy makers as well as teachers, this digest examines the notion of language across the curriculum, or teaching writing, reading, speaking, and listening as interdependent skills rather than as separate subjects. After defining language across the curriculum, the digest discusses the history and theory of this approach. It then examines the implications of this approach for teaching in terms of faculty training, classroom techniques, and curriculum change. (HTH)

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ERIC Digest

Language Across the Curriculum

by
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"Language across the curriculum" means basically two things. First, it means that gaining power in all the modes of language--writing, reading, speaking, and listening--must take place in every school course and at every school level, if this growth is to be deep and substantial. This meaning rejects the notion that the diverse uses of language are best learned in specific "skills" courses in, say, English or speech. Second, "language across the curriculum" stresses the interrelationship of the modes: One learns to write as one learns to speak as one learns to read and listen. Each ability, therefore, improves to the extent that all are exercised. This second meaning rejects the teaching of, for example, writing or reading in relative isolation from the other. Ultimately, these two meanings of language across the curriculum come together in a third: the inseparableness of language, thinking, and learning. If we do not apply the full range of our language resources to our learning of any subject, then we stifle thought, conscious and unconscious, and so deprive ourselves of more than the most superficial understanding.

History and Theory

Language across the curriculum is hardly a new idea. Teachers in every age have seen that learning flourishes in rich environments that regularly challenge students to manipulate ideas through writing and through talk between teacher and student, parent and child, peer and peer. Furthermore, it has probably never been doubted that the ability to communicate is profoundly connected

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to the desire to share and acquire knowledge. After all, teachers and textbook writers at all levels have tried to make language instruction "interesting." Model essays, speech and discussion topics, and even workbook sentences--all are presumably chosen (though not always successfully) to excite the wonder and curiosity of the student. Nevertheless, the very fact that so much has been done to fabricate a learning context for language instruction shows that "language across the curriculum," if not a new idea, was for a time submerged. Clearly, school curricula became divided--for various reasons--into "content" and "skills" courses, and educators created the circumstances out of which "language across the curriculum" would have to reemerge as a fresh concept.

Much credit for this resurgence belongs to the British Schools Council Project in Writing Across the Curriculum, which from the mid-1960s onward studied how writing--and talk--were learned and used in schools throughout the United Kingdom. In a series of books (e.g., Britton, 1970, and Martin et al, 1976), the Schools Council Project reported that the vast majority of school-based talking and writing was not "genuine communication," in which one person tries to convey new knowledge to another, but was mere giving back of information to the teacher in the role of judge. This "bogus" communication not only limited drastically the student's use of language, but produced dull, inauthentic responses. Conversely, when students were encouraged to write for audiences who would be interested in learning something new from the student (for example, readers of the school newspaper), researchers found the writing more lively and engagement with the topic more intense. Likewise, in language-rich classes, such as science labs where teams of students freely conversed in order to solve problems raised by an experiment, scripts showed that the give-and-take sparked varied language uses, including speculation and argument, plus the desire to repeat experiments or try new ones in order to answer new questions.

In the United States, Janet Emig (1977) reinforced the Schools Council conclusions by bringing to bear on the issue of language and learning the discoveries of linguistics and cognitive psychology. Vygotsky (1962), Kelly (1969), Bruner (1971), and Jaynes (1977) had found close correlation between verbalizing, in speech and writing, and the ability to assimilate perceptions. Particularly important was the recognition that language itself, whether read or heard, could be understood only if the individual translated the messages of others into his or her own words. Thus, conviction of the usefulness of language as a tool of learning grew.

Meanwhile, research on written composition began giving overwhelming evidence of the importance of talk in the development of writing ability. Britton (1967, 1975), in conceptualizing writing as a "process," defined "expressive writing," a form nearest to talk, as the matrix out of which more sophisticated written communication necessarily developed. He and other members of the Schools Council Project, as well as Moffett (1968), gave examples of classrooms in which the cultivation of many forms of discourse led to writing that showed fluency and awareness of audience. Writers such as Macrorie (1977) and Elbow (1973) demonstrated that talk <u>about</u> writing, especially within small groups of writers, could spark livelier, more coherent writing. Further studies of the speaking-writing connection have been brought together by Kroll and Vann (1981).

<u>Implications for Teaching: Faculty Training</u>

One meaning emphatically <u>not</u> implied by "language across the curriculum" is that the content area teacher must also become a specialist in the teaching of speech, a specialist in the teaching of writing, and so forth. What is required is that teachers look for ways to increase or vary the language

experiences that will help students understand and explore the subject matter of the course. As language-across-the-curriculum workshops continually demonstrate, teachers in every field are already creating language-rich environments. Most of their techniques can be applied rather easily by colleagues (Fulwiler and Young, 1982; Griffin, 1982; Thaiss, 1983).

Typically, these ideas and practices are disseminated through inservice workshops or institutes. Beginning in the 1970s, federal, state, and local sponsorship of faculty training programs, particularly at the college level, has encouraged language across the curriculum to proliferate in the United States, with special emphasis on the uses and improvement of writing. For K-12 teachers, leadership in language across the curriculum has been taken by the 102 sites of the National Writing Project, which has expanded its inservice network to include teachers in all fields. Summer seminars sponsored by the Naticnal Endowment for the Humanities at Beaver College (PA) have also contributed to the colleges-schools liaison in writing across the curriculum.

In the cross-curricular course conducted by the National Writing Project sites, faculty training occurs in two reinforcing ways: (1) NWP-trained teachers from different fields, for example, history and physics, conduct presentations on successful language-across-the-curriculum practices in their classrooms, and (2) class members practice writing-and-speaking-to-learn techniques, such as learning logs and focused small-group discussions, throughout the semester. Many such courses are set up for the faculty of a single school, to insure continuing exchange of ideas and often to initiate school-wide curriculum reforms. Though the contributions of language arts and English specialists are almost always important in these faculty-training programs, whether in colleges or schools, most programs are geared toward developing an interdisciplinary focus, with ongoing

leadership coming fro diverse departments.

Implications for Teaching: Techniques

In accordance with writing-process theory and the pioneering British research, the most successful language-and-learning-practices tend to promote relatively unpressured expression, emphasizing techniques that encourage imagination and intuition. Journals and logs, small-group projects, teacher-student dialogues, and role playing are popular devices. Traditional content-area assignments such as research papers and laboratory reports are reinterpreted in terms of process theory, so that the research paper may become an "I-Search" project (Macrorie, 1980), with significant expressive writing and classroom interaction, while the lab report may be divided into steps--method, observations, analysis--each successive portion discussed by class groups.

Student journals of various types have been particularly powerful, and popular, learning tools. Regular writing to record or to analyze speculatively has long been practiced by professionals in many fields; thus, teachers tend to take readily to this form of instruction. In process terms, journals (often called learning logs, reader response logs, or any of a number of other names) encourage and teach expressive writing. Entries can also become the basis for more formal papers, when students' writing is carried through revision and editing stages. As a learning tool, the journal provides ample practice for translation of reading assignments or lectures, as well as labs and other kinds of experience, into the writer's own words; thus the journal can improve reading and listening comprehension (Wotring and Tierney, 1982).

Journals are also adaptable to more- or less-structured learning situations. Teachers can make the journal an open-ended daily or

weekly assignment, or they can use the journal for speculative answers to specific study questions. Some teachers ask students to sharply focus their entries on analysis of reading, lectures, or experiments; others want their students to exploit the journal's power as an emotional, psychological release (Progoff, 1975). Many use the journal, with entries voluntarily read aloud in class, as a spur to class discussion, while other teachers maintain a separate "journal dialogue" with each student in writing (Staton, 1984).

The teacher's response to and evaluation of journals, as of other popular language-across-the-curriculum devices, is crucial to their effectiveness. The Schools Council research gave early evidence that expressive writing, like oral brainstorming, would fail if teachers did not continually nurture students' risk-taking in analysis or speculation. Using the journal as a facts quiz or marking entries for mechanical errors would defeat its purpose. Guarding students' privacy, by allowing them to withhold certain entries and by never demanding that students read entries aloud, also seems essential. On the other hand, since teachers often find expressive forms new to their students, it is important to show students how to make the most of the freedom to interpret and imagine that these forms offer them.

Implications for Curriculum Change

In most schools and colleges with language-across-the-curriculum programs, change has meant more variety in how language is used and learning accomplished. Where language across the curriculum has affected school programs, this change has taken such forms as increases in team-taught courses, cooperative relationships among sections of English and sections of other subjects, or the use of "writing intensive" courses in content areas to fulfill composition requirements. In some instances it has meant the full interweaving of all language instruction into the learning of

such subjects as history, art, mathematics, and science. Full applications of language across the curriculum have been most smoothly undertaken in schools with a history of interdisciplinary planning and in the all-subjects classroom in the elementary grades. In whatever setting it occurs and however deeply it affects structure, language across the curriculum promotes the fruitful, invigorating exchange of perspectives and methods among teachers who all too often have been strangers across the curricular walls.

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